OPINION: My Recollection of the Escalante Massacre

September 27, 2021
https://www.ndbulletin.com/2021/09/27/opinion-my-recollection-of-the-escalante-massacre/

Gamboa, Sr. – File photo of the late Atty. Wilson Gamboa, Sr. conferring with military personnel.*

I will never forget that Tatay, Atty. Wilson P. Gamboa, Sr., the only opposition Assemblyman of Negros Occidental, was the first and only local and national government official to personally visit the 21 massacred bodies, perhaps more, a day after the infamous Bloody Thursday of September 20, 1985, known as the "Escalante Massacre" or "ESCAM" for short.

From his narratives, the austere town of Escalante then, now a City in Negros Occidental, could not resist the militarized, local elite-led fiefdom created by the Marcosian Martial law dictatorship. Economically reinforced by the centuries-old structured social slumber likewise created by the elitists' hacienda complex, the failed Marcosian technocracy that plunge the country to financial defaults and the inevitable social emaciation brought about by the collapse of the sugar prices in the world market, painfully punctured the Escalante Town to bleed.

It was a wound of ethnic tension between the owners of the hacienda capital and their dispossessed sacada land tillers, a misery hounding the entire country dependent on land at that time and not just in Negros. It was an erupting social volcano in the 70s, staggering itself until the 80s, reaching a dramatic denouement where farm tillers, fisherfolks, teachers, nuns,

priests, seminarians, students, and many more were seen. They brought baskets of food and clothes to prepare for a three-day Escalante Welga ng Bayan at the façade of the Escalante Municipal Hall.

The drama was anti-climactic as water cannons and tear gases were hurled at the protesters linking their arms, chanting, shouting.

Then, the bullets from the dreaded militiamen started to strafe. 21 martyrs were reported but many, according to witnesses, were unaccounted for fear of another shoot-out and therefore uncompensated to this day.

The high-spirited and enlightened Escalante, prodded according to Tatay by the relentless reformist personalities of the time, of which he also took some credit being an articulate Marcos oppositionist, immediately succumbed itself into the proverbial ghost town while extreme fear gripped the entire Negros Island, a lockdown of some sort for fear of the bullets.

Tid-bits of the event were broadcasted locally sans the usual commentary but were broadcasted nationwide. This was the cue, Tatay took the earliest 1:00 AM flight to Bacolod and tag along with him a young and intrepid media man, Satch Conta.

Upon arrival at the Escalante Municipal Hall, Tatay described the presence of military personnel in full battle gear swarming the area.

Some with bloodshot eyes, warily and menacingly looking at them. He recalled and asked, despite his position as an Assemblyman, what if these unfazed militiamen shot them as well? Known to them as a Marcos enemy and under orders from the powers that be, what if they conveniently added them to their list of fallen victims, “just like that”? Although cracked and confused, he encountered men who are scoured by the powers that could abscond them from criminality, fear of sanctions, and perhaps fearless of divine retribution. They are ready to fire at him. We thanked God it was not Tatay’s time yet.

I was fresh from high school years at that time but I know the perilous situation that ensued, the unseen shroud of power behind the massacre and our very own Tatay was there physically present and armed only with his sincerity to serve which, of course, was no match to even half of a bullet shot. I know our Tatay’s thoughts. He would insist, intrude in fact, by his principles, to personally witness and report to the nation as an elected Assemblyman. This made us most fearful. His stand against the sugar plunder issue had already accorded him the honor to be on the death list long before this very Escalante massacre in fact.

Indeed, we were jolted by what he narrated. He went to the extent of requesting the town Mayor to locate and account for all the dead bodies, proceeded to the military camp in Sagay (next town), confronted the nervous and pale camp commander, and saw for himself 14 bodies more, in the state of decomposition, sacrilegiously piling one after the other at the pigsty, the camp's backyard.

Tatay then scolded the camp commander for the messy dump! Oh, what guts!

There, by his bare hands, he braved the stink, assisted by two camp staff, arranged the bodies decently, and ordered the camp commander to safely assist the fear-stricken families and arranged for their funerals. The commander looked remorse, he said.

Tatay officially reported to the highest Legislature, the Batasan Pambansa, within twenty-four hours. It was a triumph of freedom of expression at the price of anxiety and compounded stress on our part as his family. We understood however that it was a small price to pay because, through his personal account, the nation knew of another concrete example at that time of the bludgeoning coercive power that needed to be perpetrated at all cost, massacres included. The nation had to know that the Marcosian techno-cronyism that plundered the sugar industry to a "Medieval level" never saw the dawn of its "Renaissance".

The nation was informed as Tatay imperiled himself amid the apparatus of the assassins.* ***(Wilson C. Gamboa, Jr.)***